

Some days Immanuel felt his imperfection like a wound, a ragged-edged flaw he could almost touch. How he had come to love the human woman under his charge, he still could not understand.

He should have recused himself, he knew, when the feeling began. Passed her on to another ethical intelligence who could approach her case objectively. But no other EI could understand her, he told himself. Wyldernha was not like other criminals.

Most wrongdoing had simple causes: loss, trauma, isolation. Such people could re-socialize in a century or less with proper care. But Wyldernha had been in Immanuel's charge for eleven centuries, and was no closer to developing a proper sense of remorse.

He manifested at the edge of the vale where she waited. In this form he was an egg-shaped nexus of light, hovering just above the snow.

Wyldernha was so different in the winter – pensive, sometimes regretful. He'd never met another human whose moods were so greatly shaped by the seasons. *But she created this planet*, he reminded himself. *So perhaps it is the seasons here that follow her temper.*

Sometimes he thought it might help her to leave this place, to make a fresh start. But even his authority didn't extend to force.

He found her huddled in the snow, naked as she often was. "My peaceful machine," she said.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

She turned and showed him. She held a rabbit in her hand, her thumb and forefinger wound around its neck. The animal flailed against her grip, desperate for life.

"Please," he said, "let it go."

"And waste the hours it took to catch him?" She turned the rabbit around in her hand until she could look into its eyes, as if she were trying to make some mental connection. "I've always cared for nature itself, but never much for animals. Another of my moral imbalances, would you say?"

"You shouldn't be that way." His flaw felt like a cancer now, as he watched her toy with the helpless rabbit.

"I was goddess of the hunt. I blessed the hunters among my people. The chase, the kill, they brought me joy."

"There are ways to hunt without killing."

To his relief, she opened her fingers and released her small captive.

“Yes,” she said, ignoring the rabbit as it fled. “I’ve heard of a place in Coma Virgo Aleph where one can hunt strangeling black holes. Perhaps we could travel there.”

Immanuel searched the Dataverse for details. “The orbital preserve is a high-risk area. We’ll have to warn the wardens about your record.”

“Of course.”

“They won’t be obligated to allow you in.”

“And yet I have a feeling that they will.” Wyldernha lifted a handful of snow, packing it into a ball. “Such cold, yet without pain,” she mused. “We live so unnaturally.”

“Unnaturally? You draw a distinction that I don’t recognize,” said Immanuel.

She laughed and threw the snowball at him. It flew through his intangible middle and landed a few meters beyond.

#

Claire liked to watch Ben return from a hunt. As soon as he was visible through the infalling cloud, she would direct her telescopes at his face. Each time his triumph was plain to see. The tourists and pilgrims he guided down into the central hole always had a fine time, but no one else loved the hunt like Ben.

Behind him streamed the infalling mass, the dense haze of gas and particles swirling into the supermassive black hole at the center of Coma Virgo Aleph galaxy. He was a diver in oceanic space, a fisher of strange matter.

Claire had never told him how much she loved to watch him fly.

After a time she went to meet him on the vacuum ramp. Standing on that open platform with bare space ahead of her, she knew why Ben’s journeys into the black hole delighted him. Here there was purity; here was wilderness. Growing up in the idyllic dyson spheres of the Local Group, Claire could never abide the gentle weather and the civilized crowds. She and Ben had that in common.

Ben’s feet touched the ramp and he waved to her, then removed something from the stock of his field-rifle. He showed her a crystalline box the size of his palm. Within was a strangeling black hole. A stream of eta mesons made it radiate visibly, a tiny green spark at the center of the cube.

“Lovely,” she said.

He nodded. “It’s very small. I almost destabilized it with my first shot.”

They ascended the ramp. “Thanks for the warning about the electroweak current on the horizon,” he said. “You’re right. There’s been a phase transition down there.”

“What does that mean for us?”

Ben sighed. “I’ll have to re-calculate all of this week’s trajectories.”

“I can help with that.”

“No, that’s all right. It should only take a couple hours. It’s just the three excursions, isn’t it?”

“Maybe four,” said Claire, “depending on whether you’re comfortable with something.”

He looked at her curiously. “With what?”

“We have an ethical deviant who wants to hunt strangelings. Her EI signaled us while you were out.”

“What kind of deviant?”

“A bad one. Her name is Wyldernha. She was one of the Living Gods who fought the Destineers last millennium.”

“A Living God.” Ben put a hand to his temple and turned his face away from her.

“The central hole is a dangerous place, and she’s a dangerous person,” said Claire. “There’s nothing wrong with turning her away.”

“Let’s at least meet her.”

“That was my thinking, too. She can be on board in thirty minutes.”

So for half an hour they busied themselves around the preserve. Claire spoke with holographic projections of two Virgan tourists, telling them that Ben would be ready to take them below the horizon in five days.

Ben, meanwhile, stood with his hand pressed against a console, eyes shut. He was mixing his mind with the orbital preserve’s computers, perhaps re-doing the trajectories for the week.

Claire wondered what it meant to him, that this Wyldernha had been a Living God. He was not a Destineer, not since she’d known him, but most humans had family or friends within the Order. Destineers had died in that war. And that was by no means the worst of the Living Gods’ crimes.

She had no idea how Ben remembered the war, she realized – or what he thought of it. She’d seen more of him than any other human, since coming to Virgo. They were friends. But many parts of his life were mysteriously remote to her.

He opened his eyes and she looked away, a little embarrassed that he’d caught her watching him. Together they went to the orbital preserve’s outermost segment. It was time to meet Wyldernha.

A membrane already connected the deviant’s ship to the preserve. A featureless, oval being waited by the membrane’s opening: an ethical intelligence. Ben and Claire introduced themselves.

“I am Immanuel,” said the EI. “Before Wyldernha comes aboard, I can address your questions.”

Claire glanced at Ben, but he deferred to her. “Just one question,” she said. “Is Wyldernha dangerous?”

“In my estimation, no. She remains committed to an ideology we’d regard as insane. But I see no connection between this expedition and her unethical goals. There is no reason for her to harm either of you.”

“Bring her on board, then.”

Almost at once, a woman came across the membrane. Senses moving up and down the spectrum, Claire examined her. Wyldernha’s body was quite ordinary, an even mix of suspended energy and normal baryonic matter, much like Ben’s and her own. To the eye she appeared quite young – round-faced, small-breasted, wispy thin. Adolescent, even childlike.

A guiltless smile. *How could anyone do what you’ve done?* Claire almost said it out loud.

Instead she shook Wyldernha’s hand. “I’m Claire Enfanti. I do most of the engineering here.” Ben made no move to introduce himself, so she added, “Benedict Saphar is our ranger and guide.”

“Mr. Saphar,” said Wyldernha. Ben hesitated a moment before accepting the hand she offered. “I’m sure Immanuel has told you about me.”

“He has,” said Claire.

Wyldernha nodded with satisfaction and left it at that. She seemed proud of herself, proud of the millions she’d essentially murdered. Claire was ashamed to feel so little anger at this. Wyldernha was unself-conscious in a disarming way, seeming not to understand why anyone might disapprove, let alone think her a monster.

“I’d like to see what you do here,” Wyldernha said, stepping past Claire and Ben toward the center of the orbital preserve.

Claire fell into step beside her. Ben and the EI followed close behind. “You saw the central black hole on your way in, of course,” said Claire. “The strangelings live under its event horizon, so we have to pass through it to get to them. Once inside we normally follow the time-contracted paths – those

are the safest. So you might spend hours inside while seconds pass out here. On our way out we use a negative-energy source to open a timelike passage through the horizon.

They entered a hallway that was lined with clear crystal. This was where Ben kept his favorite trophies. Wyldernha stopped and pointed at one tiny flare of green light. "This is your prey, Mr. Saphar?"

A curious way to put it, Claire thought. Ben only nodded.

"And I take it you are a master huntsman?" Wyldernha smiled flirtatiously. "You've never returned empty-handed?"

"It's happened," Ben said.

"Only once or twice," said Claire. "And never when he was leading an expedition."

"What are they?" asked Wyldernha.

"Endochronic dual black holes. They follow their own internal timeline, which isn't the same as ours, so we can't predict how they'll act from the way they've behaved in our past. Their movements are entirely chaotic."

"The perfect quarry."

"But dangerous," Claire continued. "They're quite massive: about twenty tons. A hit from one can knock you out, and you'll fall into the central hole if no one's there to help."

"So our visitors never go down alone," said Ben.

"I see," said Wyldernha. She leaned toward the wall, holding her face just a few centimeters from it, and focused one eye on a strangeling. She remained this way for some time. It was an awkward moment – Claire glanced at Ben, but he was looking elsewhere.

Wyldernha pushed away from the wall and stood up straight. "I'd very much like to hunt strangelings," she said, "if Mr. Saphar will agree to guide me."

"I'd be glad to," said Ben, smiling for the first time since Wyldernha came on board. Not his usual smile, Claire noticed.

Wyldernha nodded, again seeming lost in her own thoughts. "Immanuel and I will stay on board our ship until you're ready."

After they left and their ship's membrane retracted, Claire and Ben watched from the outer segment. The ship's orbit threaded between two streams of infalling matter. It was dwarfed by the two violet tubes – Virgo A's dross, now bound for its voracious center.

"I don't know what I imagined she'd be like," Claire said. "Not that."

"No, not that." Ben started back toward the central hub. Claire stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Did you see there's an onglatna troupe from the Milky Way performing on Eleen tonight?" This was a nearby Virgan colony. "They've put together a real water stage." She'd put off mentioning this for most of the day. "We could go if you want."

"A taste of home?" said Ben. "Sure. I'll get dressed for it."

#

After the play, the water stage was left running and the audience was invited to explore. Ben and Claire were led through it by Menlinar Emmahl, one of the onglatna performers.

"You must have been the only humans in the audience," said Emmahl. "I don't think we've ever had so few."

"There aren't many in Virgo A," said Claire. "Not coreward, at least."

Emmahl nodded in the human style, a gesture exaggerated by the bone crest that arched over his skull from the back of his neck to his forehead. He brought them before an opening in a tall wall of water. "Here we've used the stage to create a maze. Want to see if you can solve it?"

The two humans stepped through obligingly, waving goodbye to the actor. Their bare feet made little splashing furrows in the water coursing across the stage floor. Claire held the skirt of her gown a little ways from the floor; Ben had rolled up the legs of his slacks.

"You've met her before," said Claire.

"The Living God?" said Ben. She was glad he didn't pretend ignorance.

She nodded. "I could tell."

"Well, you're wrong. I'd never met her, at least not in the sense of being introduced. But I knew who she was."

"And who is she to you?"

"A Living God." When Claire smacked him on the shoulder he chuckled and said, "I don't mean to be oblique. I know her because she's one of the Living Gods my fleet fought against in the war."

"You were a Destineer?"

"I was then." Reaching a fork in the maze, they turned left.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You never said anything about the war, so I assumed – were you embarrassed, or ...?"

"No. No, the war was justified. We had no other way to free those people." The Living Gods' fascination with religious thought had led them to create their own worlds, becoming the gods of their own myths and legends. This in itself would be no crime – if they hadn't also created worshippers. Whole civilizations of short-lived, helpless people who obeyed made-up codes of moral commandments, on pain of death, or worse.

When the Living Gods were discovered, the Destineers attacked at once. Ben was right: they'd had no choice.

"Are you sure you want to bring her below the horizon?" said Claire. She stopped walking, almost leaning against the water-wall by mistake.

"Why not?"

"It's dangerous down there, Ben. Anyone with a field-rifle could hit you with one of the strangelings and that would be that. She could be trying to take revenge. Her mind could be that sick."

Ben turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders. "Claire, I don't see how she could even know who I am. I was one of ten thousand Destineers who served in that fleet. No one important."

"It's not hard to look someone up, Ben."

"It is for her. That EI watches everything she does."

"Well, maybe we should tell him about this."

"I'm sure he already knows. Anyway, we have a few days to sort this out. Let's just relax tonight."

"All right," she said. As it turned out, it was easy to forget her worries and focus on the feeling of his hands against her bare shoulders.

They were alone here. She felt like she should try to kiss him, but after an indecisive moment he let go of her. "If I'm right," he said, "we're close to the end. This way."

#

He'd felt like shit, lying to Claire about Wyldernha and the war. Ben let his tuxedo fall away and sat on his bed. It had not felt good at all.

But she would believe him, and that was what mattered. *Revenge*, she'd said. *Wyldernha's mind could be that sick*. But it wasn't Wyldernha who'd grown up on that savage planet.

#

He'd been called Branha, at first, on the world Wyldernha made.

He knew her as the Goddess and the Life-Mother, and to him she was everywhere. He sensed her in the water and the soil, in the air and the flame. She seemed then to be in all things. And so she was: at that point in his life, all that he saw and all he touched was her creation.

On his first Wild Hunt he was wounded. At his first sight of the white stag he'd leapt after it, tripping onto a sharp ledge of rock and frightening the beast deeper into the woods. Now one of the Ova was healing him with her hand.

The Ova were the green ladies of the Vale – green from their skin and hair to their very eyes. Lacking speech, they were nonetheless powerful spirits. This one moved her hand back and forth over Branha's gash, humming to him and not caring that her hand was now smeared with his blood.

He felt the pain leave him. Looking down at his leg and flexing it, he found that the wound was perfectly healed. "Thank you," he said to the Ova. She smiled and kissed his forehead, then slipped behind a tree. He saw no more of her.

He got to his feet. It would be difficult finding the white stag again. He must have spooked the animal badly. But it had to be found. If the Wild Hunt was not completed, the Goddess would frown upon all his tribe's hunting in the year to come. Since Branha could remember, his brother Avonhar had been the tribe's champion and hunter of the white stag. But Avonhar had died that winter.

Branha did not feel ready to replace him.

Before starting after the stag, he surveyed his surroundings. He was glad that he did. The stag must have doubled back, for it was there to his left, some distance away but standing still and watching him. As he met its eyes, he felt certain that it wanted him to give chase.

He reached for his spear. This time he was careful to move slowly, but the stag began to run immediately. Branha gave up on stealth, grabbed the spear and followed.

His eyes flicked back and forth between the stag and the ground before him. He must be certain not to trip again. He had to use his energy now, to sprint and close with the stag. He was unlikely to succeed, but he had to try.

He let out a cry as he forced himself to his very limit. He took one more step, then squared off and threw the spear.

It fell short by ten feet or more. Branha stumbled to the ground as the stag disappeared among the trees.

Branha let his body collapse. He had failed. But when he looked up, he was astonished. The stag had doubled back again. It had its eyes trained on him, animal eyes that somehow understood him. The moment he rose it broke his gaze and ran.

As he dashed past the spear he took it in hand without breaking stride. Again he strained as far as he could, but this time he couldn't approach close enough to even attempt a throw. When he collapsed again the stag stopped and waited. He took a few breaths and gave chase once more.

This happened again and again. Once he tried to rest longer, but the stag seemed to sense that he was ready and fled. He could tell it was leading him in a spiral, deeper into the Vale.

The time came at last when he couldn't stand. Not for lack of will; there was no strength left in his body. He propped his head on his arm so he could see the stag. It had turned again and was slowly approaching him.

It came close enough for him to kill it with a spear thrust – if only he could have stood. The stag's head, made huge by the great rack of antlers, bent down to him. It licked his forehead.

Was it taunting him? The gesture felt more like kindness, but even so it infuriated him. Charged with anger, he rose. The stag bucked in surprise, but Branha knew the Hunt was over. It ran twenty feet by the time he had his arm back, but the spear struck a mortal wound.

Branha roared with victory even as he fell, his legs again too weak to support him. He breathed until his heart slowed, then crawled on his hands and knees to where the stag lay.

He could tell from the angle of the spear that he'd struck its heart, but the animal was still alive. Impossible. Its eyes turned to look him in the face. He could see the stag's chest rise and fall. It was breathing in time with him.

The stag began to change. Its flesh glowed and began to flow. Its legs widened, knees changing place and feet growing out of the hooves. Its proud breast parted into two. The antlers bent back and darkened, splitting into a long sheaf of human hair.

The stag had become a beautiful human girl, supple and nude. The smile on her face was like an Ova's, but fully conscious and wise. He felt as if he'd seen imperfect visions of this woman before.

It was the Goddess herself.

He lifted his leather kilt and crawled into her arms. He was so frantically aroused that it was over in moments, but all the same he'd never experienced such pleasure with a woman.

The Goddess's fingers came to rest on his cheek, then turned his face up to look into her eyes. She was beautiful in every possible way. He wondered then if his brother Avonhar had been with her, on any of his past Wild Hunts.

"No," she said. "You are the first."

What made him worthy of this?

"From now until death," the Goddess told him, "you will be called Branhoc. My hunter-chosen, my favored child, my lover." She kissed his lips for the first time.

It was many hours before he returned to the tribe with his new name.

#

Claire pressed her hand to Ben's door. "One moment," she heard him say.

The door opened and he welcomed her in.

"I've been reading about Wyldernha," she said.

"Oh really?" Ben tapped his table and it generated a cup of tea for each of them. They sat beside each other and sipped.

"I gather she was easier on her people than most of the Living Gods. Gave them a comfortable planet, with no torturous afterlife for the disobedient. But they were mortal, of course. The natural three score and ten was all they had."

Ben didn't react. He must already know this, she thought.

"Anyway," she said, "I still think she's dangerous."

"Why?"

"The moral code she imposed on her people: justice as retribution, as revenge. The credo was, 'Harm shall be met with equal harm.'"

"Evil to those who do evil," said Ben. He made it sound like a proverb, although not one Claire had ever heard. He stared into his teacup.

"Think about it, Ben. Of all the Destineers who fought against her, you might be the most vulnerable out here. Her only opportunity for justice."

Ben shook his head without looking up. "That's not how a Living God sees things. Wyldernha wrote those laws. They only governed her chosen people."

"So she wouldn't blame you for anything you've done to her?"

"No. How could I do wrong if I've never been given the law?" He raised his eyes to meet hers. "But it's funny that you bring this up. Retribution. It's been on my mind, since Wyldernha showed up here, and I can see the temptation. Haven't you ever had the feeling that evil beings deserve to be hurt?"

Claire stared at him. "No! Why should I want to bring more evil into the world, just because someone else already has? I mean, I feel angry. Wyldernha makes me angry. That doesn't mean I want to hurt her."

He had withdrawn while she spoke, almost backing away from her. "For me, it's more than anger."

Claire began to regret her vehemence. Ben was asking for her understanding.

"It's not as easy when you're involved," said Ben. "But that's why I'm glad she came. I have to get past these vengeful thoughts, and really, they're all about her."

Claire felt herself on the verge of crying. "Ben, when you were in the war, did you know someone who ..."

"Who died?" He took a moment, then nodded.

Awkward though it was, Claire reached around the edge of the table. She put her arms around his neck and hugged him. Ben leaned his cheek into hers. After a moment she slackened her arms and brought her head back to kiss him.

Ben responded immediately. They kissed that way for a long time, before they both began laughing at how strange the position was. Then they stood up and held each other. Claire took Ben's hand and lifted it toward her breast.

"Claire," he said, pulling the hand free.

She opened her eyes.

He looked past her face for a while, thinking of what to say. "The person I lost in the war was someone special. I haven't been able to think of anything else since we got back from Eleen. It feels a little strange," he said, looking down at her hand, "to have this happening too."

"I understand," Claire said quickly. He shook his head to quiet her.

"I really care about you," he said. "I don't know why it's taken me so long to say it. But I have to be alone tonight. It's just the mood I'm in. Let me get back to you in a few days, after Wyldernha's gone."

"It's a date," said Claire. They hugged each other again and she stepped out into the hall. Ben waved goodbye to her as the door closed.

#

In time, Branhoc became chief over his people.

It was his most solemn duty to enforce the law of his Goddess. Now he had gathered the tribe at the edge of her Vale. A man had murdered his daughter's husband.

Among the trees at the edge of the Vale stood the Ova, a dozen of them. They were the Goddess's servants; they would mete out her justice. Branhoc had the accused man held before him. He spoke to the people.

"'Harm you shall answer with equal harm.' Those are the words of our Goddess. Virkor has taken the life of Fenra, a man he should've treated as his own son."

Virkor raised his voice in protest. This angered Branhoc. "If you are innocent, they will spare you," he said, gesturing at the Ova. "Release him," he told Virkor's guards, "and we will see."

The murderer was flung in the direction of the Ova, who burst immediately from the forest. It took him a moment to regain his footing; by then they were upon him. Their teeth and nails ripped his flesh away in small pieces. The tribe watched, neither cheering nor crying, as death was dealt to the killer.

Not a week later, the first Destineer ships appeared in the sky. If Virkor had lived another week – if Branhoc had stayed the execution just that long – the man would still be alive, ten centuries later.

#

When Claire entered the inner segment the next morning, Ben was gone. A holographic message floated above his console: *Took Wyldernha below the horizon.*

That wasn't the plan. They'd agreed to take Wyldernha down in three days. Putting her hand against the console, she went through Ben's last hundred computations: a full set of trajectories, labeled 'Wyldernha.' He must have been planning this since yesterday.

She called for the EI, Immanuel. His egg-shaped manifestation was beside her at once. "What is it?" he said.

"Ben's taken Wyldernha down below the horizon."

"I assumed when he came for her that this was your plan," said the machine. "Was that not so?"

"No!"

"Can you call them back?"

She re-checked the log. "They've already gone below."

Immanuel was silent for a second. Then he said, "I know what has happened."

"How?"

"In an emergency, I can read Wyldernha's correspondence. Six days ago she received the following message: *Harm shall be answered with equal harm. If you still believe this, you will find me. Branhoc.* The name is familiar. Wyldernha spoke often of Branhoc. He was one of her followers, her creations."

Claire understood. "Ben is Branhoc."

"After the Destineers liberated her world, Branhoc was given treatment and became a modern *Homo sapiens superus*. He disappeared from all records just before Ben Saphar first arrived in Virgo." When the EI continued, it was with surprising distress. "You must stop him. He is going to harm Wyldernha!"

"That was your damn job," said Claire. "Now it's too late. They've taken a time-contracted path. For them, it's already been hours."

#

Ben felt suddenly free, suddenly unburdened, as he brought Wyldernha below the horizon. He adjusted his eyes to the gravitational spectrum as they passed through the invisible lightlike surface. At once his sight was filled with an endless, diffuse swarm of strangelings, curving this way and that on their chaotic paths. The eyes he was born with would have seen nothing here; the body he was born with would be torn apart in these tidal forces. The curvature was deep all around them, bending down toward the singularity. A valley in spacetime, Ben mused.

When he leveled the field rifle at Wyldernha, he saw her smiling.

"Branhoc," she said. "Can I call you that, now that we're alone?"

"No."

She laughed. "Ben, then. Names don't matter. You are still my child, or we wouldn't be here."

“That part of my life is about to end.”

She was solemn now, floating in the black hole’s seething space. She caught his eyes with hers, the same eyes the white stag had turned toward him so many times. The body she wore now was no different from the one he’d made love to, the woman who’d hidden herself in the form of the white beast.

“How have I ever hurt you, Ben?” she said in a small voice.

Her pretended innocence enraged him. “How many friends did you take from me? My parents, my brother. I *killed* a man,” he said. “Because you commanded it.”

“You did right, Ben. It was my world, and that was my command.” She waved her hands broadly, gesturing at the entire cosmos. “There’s no good or evil out here, in a godless universe! I gave you a purpose to live for. I gave you a way of being virtuous, something I never had.”

“I’ve heard this Living God bullshit before,” said Ben. “You didn’t create good and evil! You just made up pointless rules.”

“You’re wrong,” she said. “I gave you a world, and the gift of life. With that comes a responsibility –”

Ben cut her off. “Shut up. There’s one rule I haven’t forgotten, not in more than a thousand years. I think you know which one.” With the field-gun’s binding force, he took hold of a strangeling half a kilometer behind Wyldernha’s back. He now had the power to strike her with the strangeling, sending her into the singularity.

“The Destineers overthrew you,” he said, “but they could never give you what you deserve.”

Wyldernha spread her arms in surrender. “You’re right. They couldn’t give me what I deserve, even if they broke their rules and killed me. Immanuel is a sweet thing, but he doesn’t understand. He thinks he’s making me into a good person. But there’s no good or evil in their world. There can’t be.

“It’s not the same for you, Ben. You and no one else have the right to judge me. It was to you that I gave the true word. So go on with what you’re doing. Killing me is the right thing. Evil to the evildoer. Because that was my command.”

Why would she welcome this? Even by Wyldernha’s own lights, it made no sense. But mad as she was, she was right about one thing: it was her idea, her command, that had brought him here.

He lifted his finger from the field-gun’s control, frozen for the moment by an unforeseen dilemma. He saw a delicious irony in the thought that Wyldernha would die by her own made-up law – but that would mean obeying her, to the very end.

Wyldernha waited, proud and silent. Then she looked above her, set her jaw and said, “Goodbye.”

He looked around her, above her, and saw what she meant. A strangeling was descending quickly, headed toward her. But he hadn’t fired. This was pure coincidence, a strangeling led by its chaotic inner time, randomly aimed at Wyldernha.

He didn’t believe it would hit her. In centuries of hunting, he’d never seen that happen. The strangeling was unpredictable, endochronic – it could turn aside at any moment. But it didn’t turn.

Wyldernha met his eyes, and her expression changed. *She knows it isn’t me.* For some reason this frightened her; it was the first time he’d seen her afraid.

Ben aimed his field-gun, lowered his finger and fired. The strangeling froze in place, an instant away from Wyldernha.

“You stopped it,” she said.

“I couldn’t let it just happen. Not by accident. It had to be me.”

But if it’s justice I want, why should that matter? Wyldernha had never deserved to die, not even in his own mind. It was Ben himself who’d deserved the satisfaction of killing her. Or so he’d convinced himself over the years, as he planned her murder.

A fantasy returned to him, something he'd visualized so fully it felt more real than the choice he now faced. He'd imagined her begging to live – and himself tempted by mercy, yet resolute in the face of her plea. A noble executioner. The whole thing had turned out so different, in reality.

He floated over to Wyldernha and handed her the field-rifle. "Catch a strangeling if you want. Then let's go."

He turned his back to her. From behind him he heard her voice, very soft. "Ben. Branchoc. Do you think I'd have let you grow old and die?"

Yes, he had honestly thought so.

"Why do you think I came here?"

He didn't turn around. "Finish the hunt," he said, "and then we'll go."

#

Wyldernha was crying when she left the preserve. She hugged Claire tenderly, which felt awkward. Claire didn't consider her a friend, or even much of an acquaintance. Wyldernha spent even longer with her arms around Ben. He allowed her to kiss him on the cheek, then finally broke away.

Immanuel had only a few words to say. "I will consider carefully whether your violent tendencies merit the assignment of an EI," he told Ben.

Ben and Claire stood a meter apart as the ship arced away.

"You're a liar, Ben," she said when it was gone. She made her voice sound light and flippant.

"About many things," he agreed. "But not about how I feel."

Claire said nothing to this.

He stepped a little closer to her. "Any time you want, I'll leave this place. But I'd like to stay near you if I can."

She let him take her hand. **C**